

Richard Wagner

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Born: May 22, 1813 in Leipzig, Germany

Died: February 13, 1883 in Venice, Italy

Nationality: German

Occupation: Composer

The German operatic composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was the most important seminal figure in 19th-century music. Wagner was also a crucial figure in 19th-century cultural history for both his criticism and polemical writing.

Richard Wagner was born on May 22, 1813, in Leipzig into an unassuming family. His father died shortly after Richard's birth, and within the year his mother married Ludwig Geyer. There is still some controversy as to whether or not Geyer, an itinerant actor, was Wagner's real father. Wagner's musical training was largely left to chance until he was 18, when he studied with Theodor Weinlig in Leipzig for a year. He began his career in 1833 as choral director in Würzburg and composed his early works in imitation of German romantic compositions. Beethoven was his major idol at this time.

Wagner wrote his first opera, *Die Feen* (The fairies) in 1833, but it was not produced until after the composer's death. He was music director of the theater in Magdeburg from 1834 to 1836, where his next work, *Das Liebesverbot* (Forbidden love), loosely based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* was performed in 1836. That year he married Minna Planner, a singer-actress active in provincial theatrical life.

In 1837 Wagner became the first music director of the theater in Riga, where he remained until 1839. He then set out for Paris, where he hoped to make his fortune. While in Paris, he developed an intense hatred for French musical culture that lasted the remainder of his life, regardless of how often he attempted to have a Parisian success. It was at this time that Wagner, in financial desperation, sold the scenario for *Der fliegende Holländer* (The flying Dutchman) to the Paris Opéra for use by another composer. Wagner later set to music another version of this tale.

Disillusioned by his lack of success, Wagner returned to Germany, settling in Dresden in 1842, where he was in charge of the music for the court chapel. *Rienzi*, a grand opera in imitation of the French style, enjoyed a modest success; the Overture is still popular. In 1845 *Tannhäuser* was premiered in Dresden; this proved the first undoubted success of Wagner's career. In November of the same year he finished the poem for *Lohengrin* and began composition early in 1846. While at work on *Lohengrin* he also made plans for his tetralogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The ring of the Nibelungen), being captivated by Norse sagas. In 1845 he prepared the scenario for the first drama of the tetralogy to be written, *Siegfried's Tod* (Siegfried's death), which later became *Die Götterdämmerung* (The twilight of the gods).

Years of Exile

Wagner had to flee Dresden in 1849 in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1848. He settled in Switzerland, first in Zurich and then near Lucerne. He remained in Switzerland for the most part for the next 15 years without steady employment, banished from Germany and forbidden access to German theatrical life. During this time he worked on the *Ring*, which dominated his creative life over the next two decades.

The first production of *Lohengrin* took place in Weimar under Franz Liszt's direction in 1850 (Wagner was not to see *Lohengrin* until 1861). By this time Wagner was moderately notorious as a polemicist, and his most fundamental work of theory, *Opera and Drama*, dates from 1850 to 1851. In it he discusses the significance of legend for the theater and how to write singable poetry, and he presents his ideas with regard to the realization of the "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), which would effectively change the course of theatrical life in Germany if not the world.

The year 1850 also saw publication of one of Wagner's most scurrilous tracts, *The Jew in Music*, in which he viciously attacked the very existence of the Jewish composer and musician, particularly in German society. Anti-semitism remained a hallmark of Wagner's philosophy the rest of his life.

Between 1850 and 1865 Wagner fashioned most of the material to which he owes his reputation. He purposefully turned aside from actual composition to plan an epic cycle of such grandeur and proportion as had never been created before. In 1851 he wrote the poem for *Der junge Siegfried* (Young Siegfried), the work now known as *Siegfried*, to prepare the way for *Götterdämmerung*. He realized he would need not only this drama to clarify his other work but two additional dramas as well, and he sketched the remaining poems for the *Ring* by the end of 1851. He completed *Das Rheingold* (The Rhinegold) in 1852 after he had revised the poem for *Die Walküre* (The valkyrie).

In 1853 Wagner formally commenced composition on the *Rheingold*; he completed the scoring the following year and then began serious work on the *Walküre*, which was finished in 1856. At this time he was toying with the notion of writing the drama *Tristan and Isolde*. In 1857 he finished the composition of Act II of *Siegfried* and gave himself over entirely to *Tristan*. This work was completed in 1859, but it was mounted in Munich only in 1865.

Last Years

In 1860 Wagner received permission to reenter Germany except for Saxony. He was granted full amnesty in 1862. That year he began the music for *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (The mastersingers of Nuremberg), which he had first thought of in 1845. He resumed composition on *Siegfried* in 1865 and began sketching what would eventually become *Parsifal*, also a vague possibility since the mid-1840s. He began *Parsifal* at the urging of the Bavarian monarch, Ludwig II, then Wagner's patron. The *Meistersinger* was completed in 1867; the first performance took place in Munich the following year. Only then did he pick up the threads of the *Ring* and resume work on Act III of *Siegfried*, which was finished in September 1869, a month that also saw the first performance of the *Rheingold*. He wrote the music for *Götterdämmerung* from 1869 to 1874.

The first entire *Ring* cycle (*Rheingold*, *Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*) was given at the Festspielhaus, the shrine Wagner built for himself at Bayreuth, in 1876, over 30 years after the idea for it had first come to mind. He finished *Parsifal*, his final drama, in 1882. Wagner died on Feb. 13, 1883, in Venice and was buried at Bayreuth.

Philosophy of the *Ring*

The *Ring* is central to Wagner's career. Here he wished to present new ideas of morality and human activity that would completely alter the course of history. He envisioned a world made entirely free from

subservience to supernatural bondage, which he believed had adversely affected Western civilization from ancient Greece to the present. Wagner also held that at the source of all human activity was fear, which must be purged so that man can live the perfect life. In the *Ring* he attempted to set forth the standards for superior humans, those beings who would dominate individuals less fortunate; in turn, such lesser mortals would recognize their own inferior status and yield to the radiance offered by the perfect hero. The implications inherent in a quest for moral and racial purity are vital to Wagner's intentions in the *Ring*.

It is interesting to note that Wagner believed it was only by submitting completely to the sensuous experience that man could be liberated from the restraints imposed by rationality. However valuable the intellect might be, the rational life was regarded as a hindrance to achieving the fullest development of human awareness. Only when perfect man and perfect woman came together could a transcendental heroic image be created. Siegfried and Brünnhilde together are invincible after each has submitted to the other; apart they are imperfect.

There is no charity or idealism present in the Wagnerian myth world. The perfect ones exult only in each other. All men must recognize the superiority of certain creatures and then bow to their will. Man may quest for his destiny, but he must submit to the will of the superior one if the two come into conflict. In the *Ring* Wagner wanted to turn his back upon the civility inherent in the Hellenic-Judeo-Christian world. He preferred a realm dominated by the strength and savagery exemplified in the Norse sagas. The implications for the future of Germany were immense.

Philosophy of Other Operas

In *Tristan* Wagner rejected the affirmative way he developed in the *Ring*. Instead, he explored the dark side of love in order to plunge to the depths of negative experience. Tristan and Isolde, liberated and not doomed by a love potion they drink, willingly destroy a kingdom in order to love and to live; the sensual power of love is seen here as a destructive force, and the musical style of devious chromatics and overwhelming orchestral pulsation is perfect for the messages of the drama.

Wagner's egomania, never tolerable to anyone save those who could blind themselves totally to his flaws, came to the fore in the *Meistersinger*. The tale of the young hero-singer who conquers the old order and forces a new, sensually more exciting style upon the tradition-bound Nuremberg society is the tale of the *Ring* in a slightly different guise. (Wagner openly claimed *Tristan* to be the *Ring* in microcosm.) It is obvious in the *Meistersinger* that Wagner identifies himself with the messianic figure of a young German poet and singer who wins the prize and is finally accepted as the leader of a new society.

In *Parsifal* Wagner identified himself even more intensely with the hero as the savior, the world's redeemer. The mysteries celebrated in *Parsifal* are those prepared for the glory of Wagner himself and not for any god.

Musical Language

The scope of Wagner's vision is as breathtaking as his ideas and metaphysics are repugnant. Without the music his dramas would still be milestones in the history of Western thought. With the music, however, Wagner's importance is greatly magnified. He conceived a musical language that would most effectively present his philosophies. He intended to batter down the resistant forces of reason by means of the music. Ideally, there would be an unending melody in which the voice and text are but part of the fabric, united

with a magnificent orchestral web which becomes the action at a distinctly musical pace. The verbal language, often very obscure and tortured in syntax, is acceptable only through the music.

For Wagner, music was in no sense additive, tacked onto the dramas after completion, anymore than it was an exercise in formal rhetoric, mere "art for art's sake." Music could bind all life, art, reality, and illusion together into one symbiotic union that would then work its own unique magic upon an audience. It is no accident that Wagner's musical language is intended to dethrone reason and to ask for unquestioning acceptance of the composer's beliefs. In Wagner's reading of Schopenhauer, the musical ideal in his dramas would be not a reflection of the world but would be that very world itself.

Personal Characteristics

Such a summary of Wagner's creative life hardly hints at the extraordinary complications of his personal life which, in turn, affected his dramas. Wagner was that rare individual--a truly charismatic figure who overcame all adversities. During the years in Switzerland he managed to live for the most part on charity by means of the most amazing conniving and manipulation of people conceivable. The Wesendonck family in particular contributed to his well-being, and Mathilde Wesendonck, one of Wagner's many mistresses, was credited with partially inspiring *Tristan*.

Wagner's life after leaving Saxony was a constant series of intrigues, harangues, and struggles to overcome the indifference of the world, to find the ideal woman worthy of his love, and to be the worthy recipient of the benefits offered by the perfect patron. Cosima Liszt von Bülow was the answer to his quest for the ideal female, subservient and fanatically devoted to his well-being. Although Wagner and Minna had lived apart for some time, Wagner did not marry Cosima until 1870, almost a decade after Minna's death. Over 30 years her husband's junior, Cosima was to be the dominating, guiding spirit in the Wagnerian shrine at Bayreuth until her death in 1930.

The perfect patron proved to be Ludwig II, who literally rescued Wagner from debtors' prison and brought the composer to Munich with a near carte blanche for life and creativity. Once salvaged, however, Wagner was so offensive to all save the blindly adoring young monarch that he was forced to flee within 2 years. Ludwig, despite eventually disillusionment, remained a loyal supporter of Wagner. It was his generosity that made possible the first festival performances of the *Ring* in Bayreuth in 1876.

Never one of amenable disposition, Wagner held convictions of his own superiority that developed monomaniacal proportions as he grew older. He was intolerant of any questioning, of any failure to accept him and his creation. His household revolved completely in his orbit, and his demands upon wives, mistresses, friends, musicians, and benefactors were legion. Those who ran afoul of him were pilloried unmercifully, often unscrupulously, such as Eduard Hanslick, the distinguished Viennese music critic who became the model for Beckmesser in the *Meistersinger*.

When the young philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche first met Wagner, he thought he had found his way into the presence of a god, so radiant and powerful did Wagner seem to him. Later Nietzsche realized that the composer was something less than the perfection of the superman incarnate he had imagined him to be and turned away in disgust. Wagner never forgave Nietzsche for his desertion.

Place in History

In retrospect, Wagner's accomplishments outweigh both his personal behavior and his legacy for the 20th century. He has even managed to survive the predictable rejection by later generations of composers. Wagner created such an effective, unique musical language, especially in *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, that the beginnings of modern music are often dated from these scores.

Wagner demonstrated that music was not restricted to being pure formalism and abstract theoretical exploration but was a living, vibrant force capable of changing men's lives. He also proved that the music theater is a proper forum for ideas as opposed to being an arena for only escape and entertainment. And he demonstrated that a composer could rightfully take his place among the great revolutionary thinkers of Western civilization, questioning and attacking what seemed intolerable in traditional modes of behavior, experience, learning, and creation. Together with Karl Marx and Charles Darwin, Wagner must be given his rightful due as one of the greatest forces in 19th-century cultural history.

Further Readings

- A representative sampling of Wagner's important prose writings is in *Wagner on Music and Drama*, edited by Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn (1964). The standard biography in English is that of the great English Wagnerian, Ernest Newman, *The Life of Wagner* (4 vols., 1933-1946). See also Newman's other important studies, *The Wagner Operas* (1959) and *Wagner as Man and Artist* (1960). Recommended to bring Newman's work up to date are Robert Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (1968), and Chappel White, *An Introduction to the Life and Works of Richard Wagner* (1970). Also valuable are the specific studies, such as Jack Stein, *Richard Wagner and the Synthesis of the Arts* (1960); Robert Donington, *Wagner's Ring and Its Symbols: The Music and the Myth* (1963); and Elliot Zuckerman, *Tristan: The First Hundred Years* (1964). Less focused, but more recent, is William Berger's *Wagner Without Fear: Learning to Love and Even Enjoy Opera's Most Demanding Genius* (1998).

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